DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 498 SO 019 610

AUTHOR Banner, James M., Jr.
TITLE Mixing the New History with the Old.
INSTITUTION Council for Basic Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Sep 88
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Basic Education; v33 n1 p3-6 Sep 1988

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Design; *Curriculum Enrichment; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnicity; Higher Education; *History Instruction; Immigrants; *Social History; Social Studies; United States History
IDENTIFIERS Historical Influences; *Political History

ABSTRACT

This article addresses how to integrate social history with political history to create today's U.S. history curriculum that will satisfy new U.S. citizens' need to receive instruction in their own ethnic past. One approach is to present U.S. history as a history of social relations among various ethnic groups and to stress the common legacy of events that has changed the lives of people. However, these events have affected ethnic populations differently, so the problem lies in how to equalize social and political history instruction. The curriculum should stress how these political events affected the various groups' lives and futures. Attention to the infusion of social and political history into the curriculum will keep history accurate and specific. (DJC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED302498

MIXING THE NEW HISTORY WITH THE OLD

by

James M. Banner, Jr.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. FULHER

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO 019 610

Basic Education
A Monthly Forum for Analysis & Comment
Vol. 33, No. 1 September 1988
Council for Basic Education
725 Fifteenth Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

MIXING THE NEW HISTORY WITH THE OLD

by James M. Banner, Jr.

Those of us who teach know how devilishly difficult it is to put a course together, to create a lesson plan. It is a challenge made no easier by today's raging arguments about canonical texts, efforts to be more inclusive, and cultural literacy. What should we teach about—or, surely as tough a question, what must we leave out? How can we achieve coverage along with depth? How can we save what is most important while making the contents of our classes immediate and gripping to our students?

In no subject are the difficulties more pressing than in American history, whose curriculum, it is not too much to say, is in genuine crisis. Its classic, fundamental organizing principle—strict chronology based upon political, legal, and military events—is under attack, and no new convention has arisen to take its place. The inclusion of relatively new topics, such as race, gender and ethnicity, has fractured its coherence. Teachers, pushed and hauled by changing Advanced Placement

New- and old-style histories can be married, and recent issues can be located in their historic past.

standards and community expectations, are left pretty much to themselves in devising curricula appropriate to their differing circumstances.

Some of these problems are inevitable. In any nation's history, there is always too much to teach. In our own, the challenge of choice is particularly severe. The natural diversity of our land and people and the tradition of local control and community schools, when

coupled with calls for coverage of everyone and everything—both genders, all races and ethnic groups, every region, each class—result in curricula that have no governing aim. Having succeeded in "democratizing" their history courses only to be pressed in response to return to their former ways, teachers are without the intellectual and professional moorings they once enjoyed.

Yet to say that the problems caused by the need to make American history more inclusive are inevitable is not to say that they are insurmountable or unamenable to any change. The question remains: in the face of great difficulties, how is the "new," usually social, history to be integrated with the "old," normally political, history? How can we balance students' exposure to the distant

One answer...is to present the American past as the history of the peoples of the United States.

past in all its "pastness" while making historical study relevant, personal, immediate, alive? On what grounds can we create a modern American history curriculum that goes a decent way to balancing coverage with depth, that retains its instruction in great public issues while satisfying the implacable desires of more and more people to gain instruction in their own, often less public, pasts?

One answer, and probably the best, is to present the American past as the history of the peoples of the United States. Starting with the contact of Europeans in the fifteenth century with natives of the North American continent (who themselves had migrated from Inner Asia in the distant past), this nation has been composed of successive waves of immigrants—African and Asian as well as Native and European. Many came voluntarily to escape the old and start anew. Many—white and Asian as well as black—came as contract laborers and bondservants. The experience of distant migration, both free and unfree, is our shared legacy, is what is common to everyone of us.

We also have in common the legacy of great events, the public structure of our past. Revolution and wars forever changed the lives of reds, blacks, and whites, women and men. Treaties rearranged our land, created our borders, sealed our tribal fates, carried our enslave-

ment farther west. Elections altered our leaders and our laws—the leaders and laws that affected women as well as men, poor as well as rich, laborers as well as bankers—and in one signal case led to freedom for the Afro-Americans among us. These events, forming the public structure of our collective history, must be at the center of our history courses.

Yet each of us, each of our families, tribes, nations, and races, have experienced these collective events differently, perhaps distinctively. Equally important, many dimensions of life—work and labor, family life, sexual roles, to name but a few—have been unaffected, or only indirectly affected, by them. It is at this point—where the discrete experiences of groups and individuals diverge from the shared public experiences common to all or most of us—that what we call social history should enter the curriculum. It is here that the varied texture of historical experience should become the center of instruction.

How it should do so is the great problem. In no event should social history displace chronological, public history. Nor should social history be made to seem more important than public history, with which it is no more than co-equal in significance. Nor, in the justifiable effort to introduce the history of women, blacks, national and ethnic groups, and distinctive styles of experience into the curriculum should whites or men or the powerful be relegated to peripheral coverage.

On the other hand, women and minorities must not simply be mentioned in passing, as if mere reference to them constitutes history, nor taught in "modules"—little snippet exercises. Nor can their inclusion in the curriculum be carried out in the patronizing or belittling fashion that constitutes token coverage.

Instead, their histories must be integrated into the chronological public framework as an integral part of the life of the American peoples. Take, for instance, the American Revolution. A declaration of independence, a war, a treaty, a constitution, a new government: these are its great world-historical impacts. Yet what was the Revolution's continuing consequences for the peoples of the United States—consequences that can be related to the social experience of each sex, each one of our groups, families, faiths, classes, occupations, and so forth?

Fortunately, with increasing confidence these can be specified. And the curriculum should record them. For instance, the American Revolution redefined the roles of the sexes, so that women in the home were made

the custodians of republican values—virtue, piety, schooling—while men were freed for market-oriented commerce and occupations. Shifting social conditions, as well as a new faith in freedom, planted, against overwhelming immediate odds, both a new self-reliance among blacks and the prospect of their eventual manumission. The creation of a vast continental nation opened up new prospects for immigration and the arrival of more of our ancestors. The native tribes now became subjects of an expanding, agrarian capitalism that confined them increasingly to small corners of the land.

By an effort to search out and teach about such diverse consequences of the most "traditional" public events, the history of all peoples of the nation—and hence of all students in each classroom—can be explored. So, too, the confining as well as the liberating results of major events can be taught as part of a curricular strategy—that is, without slipping into political or ideological cant. In these ways, history can be kept accurate, specific, and whole; and society and politics—what students are apt incorrectly to separate into their own immediate lives and the distant realm of the distribution of power—can be connected in students' minds. Thus the new- and old-style histories can be married, and recent issues can be located in their historic past.

Such aims should be central to a revised American history curriculum. Its courses will be no easier to plan—let there be no denying the fact. But the result will be worth the effort because, with fidelity to the truth, they will be immediate to students' own lives—the best prescription I know for learning.

James M. Banner, Jr., a historian, is a Senior Associate of the Council for Basic Education.